



# iziko

## Museums of Cape Town

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The winds of change have blown through our land and almost everyone has felt its force. Here, in the Western Cape, there are changes afoot even in those most stalwart of institutions, the museums, and for some 250 employees, the winds of change have blown strong indeed. In 1999, it was decreed that 15 cultural institutions would merge into a single organisation called Iziko Museums of Cape Town, its components ranging from the William Fehr Collection at the Castle of Good Hope (at almost 350 years, the Cape's oldest and most historic building), to the Maritime Museum, a mere babe at 13 years and located in that hub of activity, the Waterfront.

Contained within the new consortium are guardians of art, natural history and social history collections. In addition, and to bring Iziko into the new millennium, the organisation created fledgling human resource and marketing departments, the latter essential, since Iziko, no less than any other business, must peddle its wares in an uncertain market. With reconstruction came a wake-up call to staff and everyone prepared to put their best foot forward and convince the 'panel' that they were the best person for their job - if not one more challenging. But that is in the past. We are now several months on; staff can breathe easier and examine what these changes have wrought and whether we are truly offering a service of excellence to the public.

### Iziko

Iziko is the Xhosa word for 'hearth' and also means 'centre of cultural activity' so the word conjures up an image of people gathered round a fireside whilst imbibing knowledge. Extrapolating this to the museums, the meaning is clear for we are privileged to have venues that are both inviting and historical. Gather round our hearth and you too can learn how the world used to be and what gargantuan creatures once roamed the plains. Our collections tell stories of a rich cultural past and our displays reveal the artistry of our predecessors and our peers. Under the new umbrella of Iziko, we even have the means to show you the infinity of space and how far man has come in understanding it.

### Natural history collections

It is widely held today that everything began with the Big Bang and we at Iziko can take you back that far. The Planetarium, a celestial theatre of stars beneath a 15 metre copper dome, is housed within the South African Museum, the natural history branch of Iziko. Shows cover a variety of themes. In 15 billion BC, viewers are taken to the edge of the observable universe while *Mark Shuttleworth in space* is living proof that with a little pizzazz and a lot of lucre, the sky is not the limit. With competition from scores of entertainment outlets, we promise to take you and your children one giant step further. Artist-scriptwriter Margie Walter, 1998 winner of the International Planetarium Society scriptwriting contest, churns out an endless stream of imaginative shows for the under 10s. Children are held spell-bound by tales of strange creatures and their even stranger space adventures. From the most privileged to the most deprived, over a million folk have passed through the Planetarium doors and effortlessly learnt about the complexity of space.

Mellowed by the beautiful night sky, the visitor emerges from the Planetarium to find himself in the world of natural history. The museum is filled with showcases of fossils, meteorites, dinosaurs, mammals, minerals, bird and sea life. The newly-created Department of Public Programmes and Education is also housed at the museum, and any excuse - Heritage Day, Woman's Day, the winter or summer school holidays - is reason to celebrate with special programmes and events. But staying for the moment with prehistory, Iziko also includes the West Coast Fossil Park in Langebaan, a joint venture of Samancor and the SA Museum. Here visitors enter a time-warp as they explore a rugged landscape strewn with ancient relics. This is awesome viewing and so it should be, for the Fossil Park with its 5-million-year-old fossils is en route to becoming a world-class field museum.

### Social history collections

Unlike the African bear and the sabre-toothed cat whose remains lie strewn and buried in Langebaan, 'civilised' man and his trappings tell a different story, and his history and artistry are meticulously preserved in the nine social



Top: Koopmans-De Wet House filled with treasures of the past

Top right: The stately old mansion Rust en-Vreugd situated at the foot of Table Mountain

Above: The interior decor of Natale Labia Museum reflects eighteenth-century Venice due to Count Labia's family links there

Right centre: The Planetarium has a huge Star machine which brings the wonders of the night sky to all

Right: The National Gallery where art from all over the world is on view in the spacious exhibition halls





*Groot Constantia was the home of Simon van der Stel and is one of the oldest wine estates in the country*

*Above right: The Slave Lodge, formerly the Cultural History Museum*



history sites of Iziko. We have moved swiftly along the timeline, skipping millions of centuries to arrive at the relatively recent 17th-19th centuries, a past boasting stately homes filled with grand acquisitions. Precious antiques on view include Georgian furniture, paintings, silverware, glass, English and Chinese porcelain, Japanese ceramics, Dutch Delft, a rare Clementi piano, an 1823 Grecian harp and more. Visit Koopmans-De Wet House, Bertram House, and the William Fehr Collections at the Castle and Rusten-Vreugd, and you'll be immersed in a world of grandeur. Visit the Manor House, one-time home of Simon van der Stel, on the magnificent Groot Constantia estate, one of the country's oldest wine estates and know that here is wine fit for kings. Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, banished to St Helena, took no small comfort from his imported Groot Constantia wine which he alone was permitted to consume.

and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) are presently under way at what was once the largest slave lodge in the land, housing 1 000 people at its peak, including indigenous Khoikhoi, prisoners and lunatics. Project leader Gabeba Willis-Abrahams, renowned historical archaeologist with Iziko, tells us that this is the oldest surviving VOC (Dutch East India Company) slave lodge of its kind in the world. 'Why excavate?' asks Willis-Abrahams. Her answers are manifold but in part, it is to retrieve and exhibit artifacts relating to slaves and thus commemorate the history of slavery. The Slave Lodge also houses collections of ceramics, toys, tools, silver and textiles as well as artifacts from ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and the near and far East.

Following the abolition of slavery, the historic Bo-Kaap area in Cape Town became home to many Muslims and their history and culture are commemorated at the Bo-Kaap Museum. Changing exhibitions and special events continue to celebrate different aspects of Muslim culture. Moving on down to the sea, the Maritime Museum has numerous displays on different themes and these may go some way toward explaining why the Cape has been variously labelled Cape of Good Hope, Cape of Storms and Tavern of the Seas. Included in the museum's collections is the SAS Somerset, a war time boom defence vessel, now permanently moored for public viewing at the V&A Waterfront.

### **Art collections**

Paintings are costly commodities and the history of South African National Gallery (SANG) has been fraught with economic and other difficulties. SANG's story is encapsulated in the ongoing exhibition *Recollection*. This display contains a broad spectrum of artwork and also serves as a narrative of SANG's 130 years of gain and constraint. But despite difficulties, the gallery nevertheless houses outstanding collections of South African, British, French, Dutch and Flemish art. There are ongoing and changing

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But social history is not all glitz and grandeur and the Slave Lodge (formerly the Cultural History Museum) is testimony to the darker side of the golden age. (See **CL** January/February 2003, page 47 for website.) Excavations sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific

exhibitions which are provocative and compelling and guided walkabouts are certain to provide insight into the turbulent and fascinating world of art.

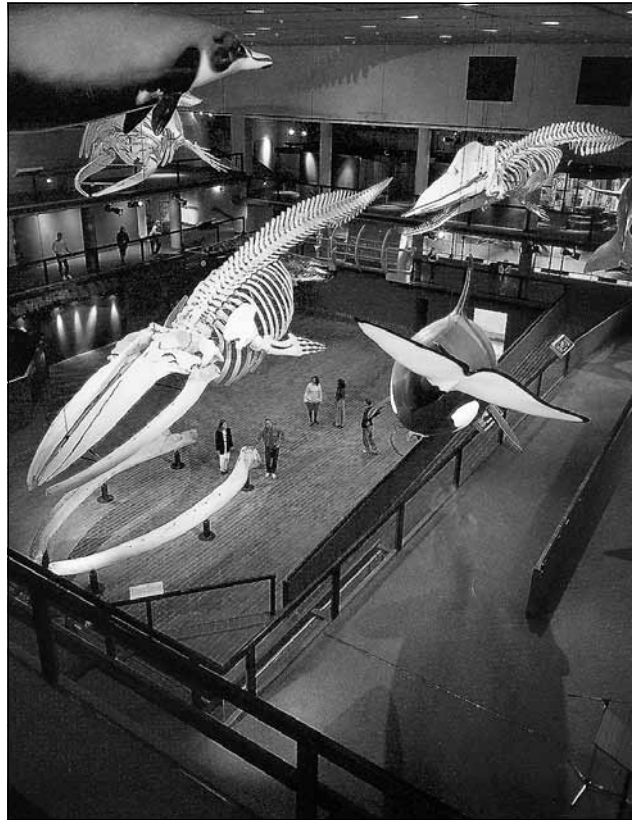
Perched above the Indian Ocean at Muizenberg is a charming bit of Venice. The gracious Natale Labia Museum was originally owned by Prince Labia who aimed to reflect the spirit of 18th century Venice in the building. Lavish yet tasteful, this highly-ornate villa offers an experience to visitors. The ongoing exhibition is called *Telling stories* and you would do well to lend an ear, or perhaps, cast an eye.

Near the heart of the city, in Greenmarket Square, stands the Old Town House, home to a world-renowned selection of 17th century Dutch and Flemish art including works by Frans Hals, Jan Steen and others. Prior to Sir Max Michaelis's kind donation in 1914 of 68 paintings (now known as the Michaelis Collection) this historical and characterful building served alternately as a police headquarter, a meeting-place for the Burgher Senate and a police headquarter again before finally giving itself over to art. Today the generous spirit of Sir Max lives on in the form of his namesake, Max the cat, who is always around to give a personal welcome. Recently Max, along with his Iziko colleagues, was obliged to have his credentials reviewed. Fortunately for this longstanding resident, he has been returned to office with tenure. (Max even got his own five-minute slot on e tv news.)

In showing you the upside of Iziko, we have not yet mentioned those adjuncts such as the Friends' organisations which open a whole new window on the world of art and natural history. Their special events will take you off the beaten track into the homes of artists or, for the more adventurous, further afield to a fossil hunt or to the world-renowned Sutherland Observatory where the new South African Large Telescope is being built. Iziko also acts host to special exhibitions such as The World Press Photo exhibition, showcase of the world's most outstanding press photography. To expound further on the range of activities taking place under the umbrella of Iziko would require far more space than we have here.

We cannot deny, however, that Iziko is still in its infancy, and there are teething problems aplenty. Like other players in the cultural field, we must strive to be efficient and innovative if we're to maintain and increase our share of the pie in terms of visitors and sponsors. Funding is as scarce a commodity for us as for other cultural organisations and added to this, is the fact that the media has had its fair jibe at us, disparaging our 'crumbling buildings'. That may be, but could that possibly detract from the treasures within? After all, the buildings of Venice are not only crumbling but tumbling into the sea, but does that deter the sightseer? Our foundations are solid, and we are optimistic that everything will be addressed.

Are we delivering a service of excellence? Given our venues, our collections and the number of talented staff members, we can confidently say that we have all the



*The South African Museum, the oldest and largest in Southern Africa, has been enlarged with modern extensions. In the centre of the new wing is the spectacular Whale Well*

ingredients. Today we are not only custodians, scientists, researchers, educators and administrators, we are marketers too, and we want to share with you every 'show-room' and every showcase. We may be the ultimate storytellers but you, the public, are our audience. Without your interest there would be no point to our existence nor our striving for excellence. We invite you to leave your hearth awhile, and spend some time at ours. After all, you, the visitor, are our lifeblood and our *raison d'être*.

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#### **Acknowledgement**

*Photographs by P Warne and H Mair with kind permission from Iziko Museums of Cape Town.*

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